

# THE U.S. ARMY CAMPAIGNS of the MEXICAN WAR



## DESPERATE STAND The BATTLE of BUENA VISTA

# Introduction

The Mexican War (1846–1848) was the U.S. Army's first experience waging an extended conflict in a foreign land. This brief war is often overlooked by casual students of history since it occurred so close to the American Civil War and is overshadowed by the latter's sheer size and scope. Yet, the Mexican War was instrumental in shaping the geographical boundaries of the United States. At the conclusion of this conflict, the U.S. had added some one million square miles of territory, including what today are the states of Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California, as well as portions of Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, and Nevada. This newly acquired land also became a battleground between advocates for the expansion of slavery and those who fought to prevent its spread. These sectional and political differences ripped the fabric of the union of states and eventually contributed to the start of the American Civil War, just thirteen years later. In addition, the Mexican War was a proving ground for a generation of U.S. Army leaders who as junior officers in Mexico learned the trade of war and later applied those lessons to the Civil War.

The Mexican War lasted some twenty-six months from its first engagement through the withdrawal of American troops. Fighting took place over thousands of miles, from northern Mexico to Mexico City, and across New Mexico and California. During the conflict, the U.S. Army won a series of decisive conventional battles, all of which highlighted the value of U.S. Military Academy graduates who time and again paved the way for American victories. The Mexican War still has much to teach us about projecting force, conducting operations in hostile territory with a small force that is dwarfed by the local population, urban combat, the difficulties of occupation, and the courage and perseverance of individual soldiers. The following essay is one of eight planned in this series to provide an accessible and readable account of the U.S. Army's role and achievements in the conflict.

This brochure was prepared in the U.S. Army Center of Military History by Stephen A. Carney. I hope that this absorbing account, with its list of further readings, will stimulate further study and reflection. A complete list of the Center of Military History's available works is included on the Center's online catalog: <http://www.history.army.mil/catalog/index.html>.

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Chief of Military History

# Desperate Stand

## The Battle of Buena Vista

Portions of the U.S. Army (nearly half of the Regular Army) under the command of Maj. Gen. Zachary Taylor achieved an unbroken series of battlefield victories during the first nine months of the war with Mexico. From 8 May to 23 September 1846, Taylor defeated Mexican forces at Palo Alto, Resaca de la Palma, and Monterrey. These victories vindicated the oft-scorned U.S. Regular Army and demonstrated the competence of the graduates of the U.S. Military Academy. In the months following these victories, Taylor became a popular hero, and newspapers speculated that he would win the Whig Party nomination for president in 1848. This prominence infuriated President James K. Polk, a Democrat, who was angry with Taylor both for making his presidential ambition known publicly and for granting overly generous cease-fire terms to the Mexican Army after the battle for Monterrey.

Meanwhile, on the basis of promises from former Mexican strongman Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna that he would settle the Texas border issue and sell California to the United States, Polk had allowed him to return from exile in Cuba through the U.S. naval blockade in July 1846 to resume power. Polk hoped this would hasten the end of the war. Instead, Santa Anna seized control and hurriedly assembled a large force with the intention of driving the American Army out of northern Mexico. His attack struck Taylor's force at a place the Americans called Buena Vista.

### *Strategic Setting*

In early October 1846, after the Americans' capture of Monterrey in September, Santa Anna moved some 220 miles from Mexico City to San Luis Potosi, 250 miles south of Monterrey. Resisting demands from threatened Mexican cities that he immediately confront the invading forces, he instead concentrated most of his forces at this location in the northern part of the country. From this core, he immediately began rebuilding the *Army of the North* into a massive force that might be capable of driving the Americans out of Mexico.

The problems Santa Anna faced in accomplishing this task seemed insurmountable, but his enthusiasm and personal charisma won

acceptance—if not agreement—for his decision, even from bitter opponents of concentration. The generalissimo ordered each Mexican state to recruit a quota of troops from among men aged sixteen to fifty years. Because no national mechanism existed to enforce conscription, he approved various coercive measures to pressure states to comply. He also recruited jailed criminals, bandits, and any other available able-bodied men. In the end, he increased the *Army of the North* to some 25,000 men, concentrated around San Luis Potosi. He accomplished this remarkable feat by late December, in less than four months. It was the largest force Mexico would field during the entire war, but the reconstituted *Army of the North* was largely untrained and untested, with few veteran units left from the early months of the war.



*Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna*  
(Library of Congress)

Santa Anna also faced financial problems. He needed many more troops and had to purchase supplies and arms, all of which required substantial funding. He drew on his personal fortune and coerced money from state governments, the federal coffers, and the cash-rich Catholic church. He threatened and cajoled Catholic archbishops to provide loans, grants, and even church property to pay for the cause.

On the other side, President Polk and Secretary of War William L. Marcy had both fumed at Taylor's seemingly generous terms of surrender at Monterrey when they received his report on 11 October. [See CMH publication *Gateway South: The Campaign for Monterrey.*] The fact that Taylor allowed the Mexican Army to vacate the city with its firearms was bad enough, but they could not forgive his granting an eight-week armistice. The president pushed ahead with his plan to discredit Taylor, questioning the general's loyalty and vigor in continuing the war. Finally, Marcy ordered Taylor to terminate the armistice, an order the general received on 2 November.

President Polk also decided to give sixty-year-old Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott, general-in-chief of the U.S Army, a field command.

Scott was clearly not his first choice; in fact, the president disliked him personally. But Polk hoped to divide public support between these two politically ambitious Whig generals, thereby frustrating any hopes of a successful presidential bid by either in 1848. Polk wanted to promote a Democrat to take charge, but he could not find a suitable officer. Earlier, he had schemed with Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri (an influential, egotistical, and politically ambitious Democrat) to give him command of U.S. forces in Mexico, but the mere suggestion caused a stir even among Polk's staunchest supporters. Therefore, he had to settle on the highly professional and experienced Scott and be satisfied with appointing Democrats from civilian life to general officer billets. Scott met with Polk on 19 November and received orders to take command in the field immediately.

In mid-November, when Santa Anna received the message from Taylor that the armistice had been terminated, he responded by hurriedly completing the defenses around San Luis Potosi. He was certain that the Americans would attack that strategically important city. He dispatched cavalry units northward to destroy all water tanks and wells along likely American lines of advance. Santa Anna also sent strong detachments to watch for signs that Taylor was beginning to move south.

But Taylor believed that to force Mexico to accept a peace treaty the Polk administration would have to invade the coastal harbor of Vera Cruz and then move on to Mexico City. He believed that Santa Anna would never cede Mexico's northern territories (especially modern New Mexico, Arizona, and California) unless the United States attacked what Taylor saw as the center of gravity: central Mexico and its capital, Mexico City. Taylor argued that it was impractical to attack Mexico City from Monterrey: Nearly 650 miles of mostly inhospitable land would stretch American supply lines too thin. He further pointed



*Thomas Hart Benton*  
(Library of Congress)



**MEXICAN WAR**

1846-1847



Engagement, Date Indicated



U.S. Advance, Date Indicated



Disputed Territory





out that his force did not have the manpower to launch such an operation. President Polk and Secretary Marcy agreed with this assessment and directed Scott's field command to undertake the campaign against Mexico City. This split American combat operations into two spheres—what we would now call two separate theaters of operation.

In keeping with his role of directing the northern theater of operations, Taylor chose a closer objective, the town of Saltillo, fifty miles west of Monterrey. Saltillo had considerable strategic importance because major north-south and east-west thoroughfares ran through it. The town guarded the southern approaches to Monterrey, Taylor's main headquarters. Saltillo also commanded the road to the agriculturally rich region around Parras, some seventy-five miles farther west.

Taylor and a force of 1,000, composed mostly of regular artillery companies and dragoons, left their camp outside Monterrey at Walnut Springs on 12 November 1846 to take Saltillo. After moving off the plain in front of Monterrey, the column rapidly ascended into the Sierra Madre foothills. This rugged country was quite different from the flat and oppressively hot and humid region around the Rio Grande corridor. Along the way, the Americans supplemented their

foodstuffs with fresh grains and fruit from numerous apple and cherry orchards. Taylor quickly entered Saltillo and took the town without firing a shot. The Mexican Army that had surrendered at Monterrey had long since abandoned the town and moved south to San Luis Potosi.

Taylor directed Brig. Gen. John E. Wool to abandon his originally planned expedition in mid-November. Secretary Marcy had ordered Wool—with some 3,400 men organized into the Division of the Center—to march from San Antonio, Texas, to Chihuahua, in north-central Mexico. Wool's command left the United States on 23 September



*Winfield Scott*  
(Library of Congress)

1846 on what proved to be a five-month expedition. The division consisted of a small core of Regular Army companies (from the 1st and 2d Dragoons, the 4th Artillery, and the 6th Infantry) as well as three regiments of volunteers.

Wool, an excellent tactician and leader, was a strict disciplinarian and a veteran of the War of 1812 and numerous Indian conflicts. On the march south through Mexico, he instituted harsh measures to keep his men under control. Unpopular though these measures were, they succeeded in maintaining discipline.

Taylor redirected Wool's division to Monclova, 120 miles north of Saltillo. From that position, Wool could protect rich agricultural lands that extended through the area, occupy an alternative route to San Luis Potosi, and be in position to move on either Durango or Zacatecas, both located several hundred miles to the southwest. In addition, the force could provide support if Taylor's army were attacked. Wool occupied Monclova without incident on 29 October and stayed in that town for most of November. In early December, Wool marched to Parras, some seventy-five miles west of Saltillo, to close the distance between Taylor's force and his own.

Taylor also sent a detachment of Maj. Gen. Robert Patterson's division to support the Navy's occupation of the Gulf Coast town



*John E. Wool*  
(Library of Congress)

of Tampico in early November. Patterson, a native of Ireland and one of the president's civilian appointees, had served as a Regular Army captain during the War of 1812. After the war, he retired and became a wealthy businessman and influential Democrat. After Vera Cruz, Tampico was the most important port on the Gulf of Mexico. There had been calls in that region to break away from Mexico City and create an independent state. The Polk administration hoped that an American presence would further encourage the separatist agenda. More important, Tampico would make an outstanding base for the

Navy's Gulf Squadron and could be used to support an assault on Vera Cruz. Patterson's men arrived on 23 November and provided security until more troops could occupy the port town.

Once the Americans completed these moves, they settled into garrison duty, an extremely unpopular mission with the volunteers. They found the daily routine boring, resented the hierarchy of the chain of command, and felt that the inaction robbed them of the opportunity to win acclaim on the battlefield. As they had on the Rio Grande, depredations against the local populace became a major problem. Mexican citizens charged volunteers with theft, assault, rape, and other violent crimes. Volunteers often slipped away from camp to drink and gamble at local establishments, which made them easy targets for Mexican bandits and irregulars, who took every opportunity to attack isolated soldiers. These attacks led volunteers to justify various forms of retaliation, creating a cycle of violence that rapidly became a major cause of guerrilla activity that would plague American lines of communications in northern Mexico for the next year.

Meanwhile, Brig. Gen. (as of 30 June 1846) Stephen Watts Kearny enjoyed great initial success on his march toward California. Kearny led a column of about two thousand troops from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to San Diego, California, through the important commercial

center of Santa Fe in what is today New Mexico. The force that departed Fort Leavenworth on 5 June 1846 included troopers from the 1st Dragoons, as well as several volunteer units: the 1st Missouri Mounted Volunteers, the St. Louis Volunteer Artillery, the Missouri Infantry Battalion, the Laclede Rangers, the 2d Missouri Volunteers, and the Mormon Battalion. The Mormon Battalion had been raised in Iowa after the Polk administration authorized church leader Brigham Young to recruit a battalion of volunteers to serve in California. Kearny captured Santa Fe on 17 August without firing a shot. Because of news that American settlers had taken control of California during the “Bear Flag Revolt,” Kearny did not expect any opposition and continued on to California with a contingent of only 100 dragoons. But as it turned out, he had to fight his way to the Pacific Coast, including a major engagement at San Pascual, where he lost eighteen men killed and thirteen wounded. In January 1847, the survivors launched a joint Army-Navy offensive in an effort to regain control of California after the Bear Flag rebels were themselves overthrown in September 1846.

In Mexico, Santa Anna planned his next step while Taylor consolidated his forces. Santa Anna gained valuable intelligence by reading U.S. newspapers, which reported that an attack on Vera Cruz was probable. In early December, he also received information from intercepted message traffic that Taylor would lead an expedition to Victoria, 150 miles southeast of Monterrey, and that Wool would continue his march to Chihuahua. These examples show that Santa Anna’s intelligence collection was impressive, if at times only partially correct. Beginning in early December, Taylor did march with Brig. Gen. David E. Twiggs’ division of volunteer regiments to Victoria, primarily to break the monotony of garrison duty. However, the Mexican general did not realize that Taylor had canceled Wool’s march to Chihuahua and had instead ordered the column to Monclova.

On the basis of this faulty information, Santa Anna planned an attack on Taylor before Christmas 1846. He decided to march some 13,000 troops (just less than half of his total force) north to hit the small American force at Saltillo, some 280 miles away. Brig. Gen. William J. Worth, whom Taylor had left in command at Saltillo while he marched with the volunteer regiments to Victoria, heard rumors from Mexican traders of the impending assault and hurriedly called for reinforcements. Taylor, already more than halfway to Victoria, hastened back to the main American position with General Twiggs’ entire complement of regulars, while Brig. Gen. John A. Quitman’s volunteers continued on to Victoria. Meanwhile, Maj. Gen. William

O. Butler, commander of the Monterrey garrison, called troops up from the Rio Grande corridor. The 55-year-old Butler had served with Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans in the War of 1812 and was one of the most capable of the volunteer generals President Polk recruited from civilian life.

At 1400 on 17 December, General Wool received an urgent plea for assistance from Worth. Less than two and a half hours later, his command struck out toward Saltillo with more than 350 wagons, 400,000 musket cartridges, 400 rounds of artillery ammunition, fifty-five days' worth of provisions, and about 3,400 men. His men made the 100-mile forced march from Parras to Saltillo in less than four days. Wool's maneuver was a textbook example of a supporting force rapidly moving to the decisive point to concentrate and lend aid.

On his arrival at Saltillo, Wool (who outranked Worth) assumed command of the U.S. forces. He immediately began searching for the best defensive position to make a stand. On 23 December, he selected a pass through the Sierra Madre mountains twelve miles north of Agua Nueva; the pass was called La Angostura, which means "the narrows." He began planning for operations, but the preparations proved unnecessary for the moment, as Santa Anna canceled his attack when he heard of Wool's movement. After Taylor learned of Wool's arrival in Saltillo, he resumed his march toward Victoria with Twiggs' division and took that provincial capital on 5 January 1847.

Although the danger of an attack against Saltillo had temporarily passed, other developments made that position even more precarious. Scott, eager to take his field command, left Washington, D.C., for the theater of operations on 28 November 1846. He needed time to assemble troops to launch an assault against Vera Cruz before the wet spring months, when the yellow fever season would return to the low-lying coastal regions. En route to southern Texas, Scott wrote Taylor to reassure the popular general that he would not supersede his command. He offered no other details but suggested they meet to discuss future operations. When Scott arrived on the Rio Grande on 26 December, he found that Taylor was leading the expedition to Victoria and was not available. Scott had wanted to tell Taylor personally that he was requisitioning Worth's regulars as well as the volunteers of Twiggs and Patterson for his Vera Cruz expedition. Instead, he sent copies of the orders to Taylor and to General Butler at Monterrey. That decision would leave Taylor with fewer than 5,000 volunteer troops, a few regular artillery companies, and two squadrons of dragoons.

When he received Scott's letter on 14 January 1847, Taylor exploded. He was outraged that Scott had breached protocol by requisitioning the units instead of requesting them from Taylor. Although Scott had done this to save time, Taylor took it as a direct insult. He was infuriated that Scott had taken most of his regulars and nearly all of his veterans, leaving him with only a handful of green troops. Taylor considered Scott's decision a personal affront and an effort to marginalize Taylor's role in Mexico. Their relationship never recovered. Finally, Taylor had no intention of following Scott's directive to abandon Saltillo, return to Monterrey, and avoid sending detachments south of that town.

More important, on 13 January 1847, Mexican irregulars ambushed and killed Lt. John A. Richey, the courier carrying Scott's orders to Butler. The communication methods available to commanders during the Mexican War relied primarily on mounted messengers. While Richey had a small guarding force—approximately ten men—couriers generally lacked an armed escort and were easy targets for guerrillas and highway robbers. (The War Department did use an early telegraph during the conflict, but only between the Office of the Quartermaster General in Washington, D.C., and a quartermaster depot in Philadelphia. Not until the American Civil War did army commanders have access to both strategic and field telegraphs.)

With this crucial intelligence, Santa Anna reinstated his planned offensive against Saltillo, this time with his entire army of some 25,000 men. His strategic plan was simple: He would sweep the Americans out of northern Mexico with the attack against the Army of Occupation at Saltillo and then swing southeast to Vera Cruz to repel Scott's invasion force before it left the coastal yellow fever zone. Santa Anna dispatched a strong force of cavalry from his *Army of the North*: He sent some 3,500 cavalry, with perhaps as many as 3,000 additional irregulars, under Brig. Gen. Jose Urrea to disrupt American lines of communications between Monterrey and Matamoros. From his position behind the Americans, Urrea could block their retreat from Saltillo and perhaps even compel their surrender. (In 1836, during the War for Texas Independence, Urrea had led a sizable cavalry force into Texas and captured some 300 Texans at Goliad; the Texans were subsequently executed by Urrea's second-in-command on Santa Anna's orders.) Santa Anna sent another cavalry force under Brig. Gen. Jose Vicente Minon to serve as a covering force in front of Taylor's force at Saltillo. Minon, a native of Spain, had originally

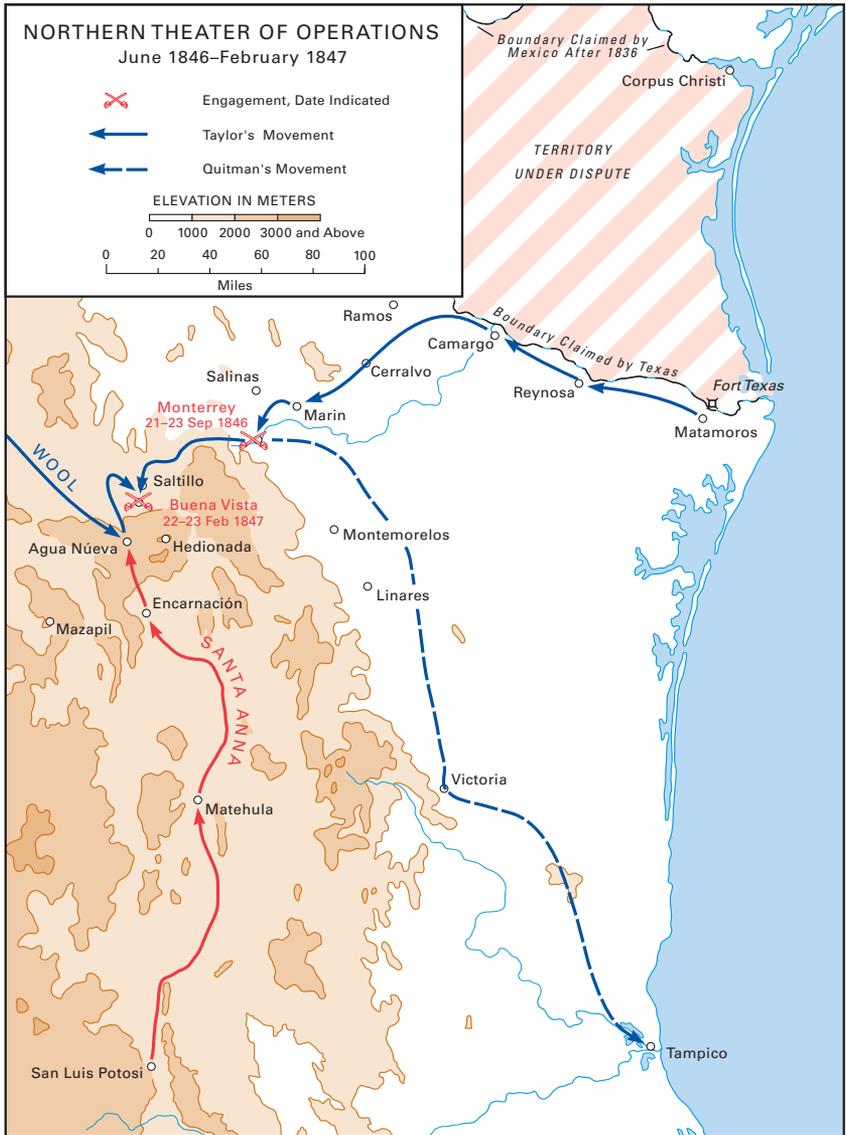
fought with the Spanish Army but later changed sides and fought with the Mexicans during the war for independence. After the Mexican War, he put down a number of peasant rebellions. Minon's objectives were twofold: He would screen the main body of the Mexican Army on its march northward and, if necessary, prevent the Americans from withdrawing until Santa Anna arrived. With strong cavalry forces to screen his advance and cut the Americans off from the Rio Grande, Santa Anna planned to use his superior infantry numbers to destroy the American Army at Saltillo.

### *Operations*

Santa Anna's advance guard departed San Luis Potosi on 27 January 1847 to clear a path northward. Over the next four days, the remaining six infantry and cavalry brigades—a force of some 21,500 men—began their march toward Saltillo, 280 miles north across a stretch of dry, barren land. Santa Anna himself left the town on 2 February with his personal escort, an elite, loyal unit known as the *Regiment de Hussars*.

The Mexican Army's weak logistics system created terrible hardships during its three-week trek toward Saltillo. Santa Anna's November decision to order wells destroyed in order to delay Taylor's move against San Luis Potosi now cost his force dearly, as his soldiers marched with barely enough water to survive. Cold weather gripped the region, and, because they lacked heavy coats and shoes, many of the troops were incapacitated by illness—the raw recruits from tropical regions of Mexico were especially unaccustomed to both the inclement weather and the hardships of army life. Finally, the Mexicans lacked sufficient wagons to carry rations for their large force, and the land was far too barren to fully support their movement. As a result, the men were half starved by the time they reached their destination. Conditions were so bad that Santa Anna ordered any man found more than one and one-half miles from camp to be shot as a deserter, even if he had fallen behind foraging for food or because he was too weak to keep up.

Despite the appalling state of affairs, the Mexicans made remarkable progress. Without being detected by Taylor's men, Santa Anna's force began assembling in Encarnación, less than forty miles south of Saltillo, on 18 February. They had conducted a winter march of 240 miles in about twenty-one days through a desert, averaging nearly 11 ½ miles a day on starvation rations.



Most Americans—including Taylor, who had been bombarded by constant rumors of attack since before Christmas—discounted the latest reports. Taylor did maintain regular patrols to the south but doubted they would find anything because of the difficulty the

Mexican Army would have in crossing the dry plain between San Luis Potosi and Agua Nueva, a town approximately seventeen miles south of Saltillo. One of his patrols had actually made contact with General Minon's cavalry screen on 16 February, a few miles north of Encarnación. The American scouts failed to realize that they had located the leading edge of Santa Anna's army and instead reported that they had seen a few mounted irregulars.

As Santa Anna marched his army northward, Taylor moved his main body of approximately 4,650 men seventeen miles south of Saltillo to Agua Nueva, arriving on 5 February. The move helped break the monotony of garrison duty and, more important, would deprive Santa Anna of the area's crucial water supply in case the Mexican leader actually was moving north in force. The Americans enjoyed making camp on the wide plain surrounding the town. It offered an abundance of water and a welcome change of scenery. The position, however, was not as good for defense as they first thought. Engineers conducting a reconnaissance of the area discovered bypasses through the hills both to the east and west.

Although General Wool dispatched cavalry patrols on reconnaissance missions into the hills and to the south, Santa Anna's luck in marching undetected with such a vast army did not run out until 20 February, when Lt. Col. Charles A. May and a detachment of 400 men captured a Mexican soldier who was sending signals at a ranch south of Agua Nueva. The prisoner reported the approach of Santa Anna with a large force.

At roughly the same time, a reconnaissance party of Texas Rangers, composed of volunteers under Capt. Ben McCulloch, discovered the main Mexican camp at Encarnación. On receiving this news, Taylor ordered Wool's force at Agua Nueva to fall back to the strong defensive position at La Angostura.

Col. Archibald Yell's mounted Arkansas volunteers remained at Agua Nueva to screen the withdrawal of men and supplies. Yell and his men, often called the Arkansas Ransackers, were among the most undisciplined and violent volunteers serving in northern Mexico. Although popular with his soldiers, Yell had been arrested by General Wool in early December for disobeying orders. After midnight on the morning of 21 February, Yell's pickets made contact with Santa Anna's advancing force. His volunteers burned the remaining stores and pulled back to the new American position at La Angostura.

General Wool had first considered defending La Angostura on 23 December 1846, during the pre-Christmas attack scare, and had used

the area as his headquarters in early February when Taylor moved his army to Agua Nueva. The pass lay slightly more than a mile south of hacienda de Buena Vista, for which the Americans later named the battle. In stark contrast with the broad plains around Agua Nueva, at La Angostura the strategically important Saltillo road descended into a 2 ½-mile-wide valley in the Sierra Madre mountains. Steep rock walls lined the road on either side, and steep gullies and ravines ran perpendicular to the road, which limited lateral mobility across the valley.

The Saltillo road ran roughly north-south through the valley on its western edge. The road itself traversed three miles of the narrow pass of La Angostura and at one point contracted to a mere forty feet wide. South of this contraction, a small hill dominated the Saltillo–Agua Nueva road, while deep gullies with steep slopes made any flanking movement to the west impracticable. On the eastern side, fifty-foot-high bluffs led up to what was known as the plateau, a piece of high ground approximately a mile and a half wide. These bluffs prevented artillery, cavalry, or large infantry formations from exiting the valley except where the ravines cut the heights.

Deep, steep-sided ravines ran perpendicular to the road and extended eastward to the foot of the Sierra Madres. Although small groups of infantrymen could climb the rugged sides of the cuts onto the plateau, it was much more difficult for larger infantry units trying to maintain their formation to do so. Cavalry and artillery could gain access to the plateau only at the head of one of the many ravines cutting through the terrain.

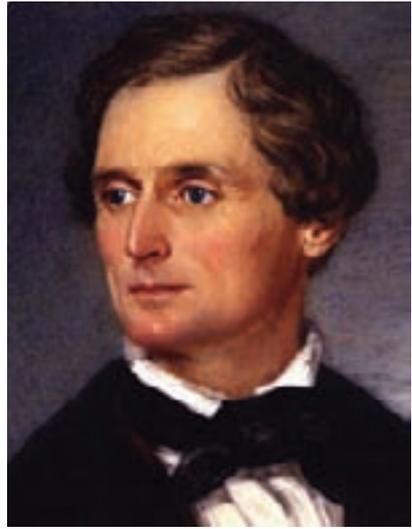
The area was ideal for a defensive operation, which is exactly what Wool needed to maximize his limited manpower. If Wool could defend the Saltillo road, he would rob Santa Anna of the only high-speed avenue of approach through the valley. Since it would be very difficult for Santa Anna to move onto the plateau in numbers, Wool hoped to turn the battle into a regimental fight. After Scott requisitioned most of Taylor's troops, the American presence in the north was little more than a skeleton force of 4,750 men and thirteen cannon at Buena Vista. With American forces in central Mexico drastically reduced, few reinforcements were available to Taylor. Outside the Saltillo–Buena Vista force, there was only the garrison force in Monterrey, fifty-five miles away.

Taylor's force at Buena Vista consisted primarily of volunteer infantry, of whom only Col. Jefferson Davis, Taylor's son-in-law, and his 1st Mississippi Rifles had experienced combat. The remainder of the force comprised Brig. Gen. Joseph Lane's Indiana Brigade (which consisted

of Col. William A. Bowles' 2d Indiana Infantry and Col. James H. Lane's 3d Indiana Infantry); Col. John Hardin's 1st Illinois Infantry; Col. William Bissell's 2d Illinois Infantry (to which Capt. P. Edward Conner's Texas Volunteer Company was attached); Col. Humphrey Marshall's 1st Kentucky (which contained a mixture of mounted and dismounted troops); and Col. William McKee's 2d Kentucky Infantry. Yell's Arkansas cavalry regiment and McCulloch's mounted Texas Rangers constituted the volunteer cavalry. The only Regular Army troops under Taylor's command were three companies of artillery (Capt. Braxton Bragg's Company C, 3d Artillery; Capt. Thomas W. Sherman's Company E, 3d Artillery; and Capt. John M. Washington's Company B, 4th Artillery) and two squadrons of dragoons (Capt. Enoch Steen's and Lt. Col. Charles A. May's squadrons of the 1st and 2d Dragoons, respectively). Command and control was problematic, as no units other than Lane's brigade of two regiments were organized into larger formations; instead, all reported directly to General Wool, whom Taylor had designated as the forward commander. Three cannon and seven infantry companies remained at Saltillo to defend the American line of communications; they did not participate in the battle.

Santa Anna's army dwarfed its American counterpart. More than 15,000 men had completed the 280-mile march to La Angostura, the last fifty miles of which were through a waterless desert. In Santa Anna, the Mexicans had a charismatic leader who continually exhorted his soldiers to liberate Mexico. Although many of his troops were half-trained and all were physically taxed, they were highly motivated and ready to fight.

Unlike Taylor, Santa Anna organized his more numerous regiments into brigades and divisions. Maj. Gen. Francisco Pacheco's *Vanguard Division* consisted of regiments of the *1st and 2d Active Militia of Guanajuato*. Maj. Gen. Pedro de Ampudia's *Light Infantry Brigade*



*Jefferson Davis*  
(National Portrait Gallery,  
Smithsonian Institution)

was made up of the *1st, 2d, 3d, and 4th Light Infantry* regiments. Maj. Gen. Manuel Lombardini's *Center Division* consisted of the *1st, 3d, 5th, 10th, and 11th Line Infantry* regiments, mostly veteran troops. Maj. Gen. Jose Maria Ortega commanded the *Rear Guard Division's 12th Line Infantry*, also filled with veterans, as well as assorted militia units. The cavalry riding with Santa Anna's force was divided into four brigades commanded by Generals Minon, Julian Juvera, Anastasio Torrejon, and Manuel Andrade. Santa Anna also had an artillery train, engineers, and other militia and sapper (*zapadore*) units at his disposal. Finally, General Urrea commanded an observation division consisting of Brig. Gen. Ciriaco Vasquez's infantry brigade supported by nearly 3,500 cavalymen and various irregulars; however, this unit was not involved at Buena Vista and instead attacked Taylor's line of supply between the Rio Grande and Monterrey.

Santa Anna's chief of engineers, Ignacio Mora y Vallamil, personally commanded the *Army of the North's* heavy artillery (approximately ten pieces), while the remaining thirty guns were interspersed among the various divisions. The Mexican guns were for the most part heavier than the American ones and not nearly as mobile. The numerous ravines and rough terrain prevented the heavier guns from moving forward to remain in range of the Americans as the battle progressed northward.

Santa Anna had two other units of note. The *Regiment de Hussars*, the best-trained unit in Mexico, was Santa Anna's personal guard. The *Legion de Extranjeros* were mostly Irish Catholic immigrants who had deserted from the U.S. Army; they were perhaps the most highly motivated troops on the battlefield—they knew that if they were captured, they might be hanged for treason. Later in the conflict, they became known as the *San Patricio* (Saint Patrick) *Battalion*.

Wool realized that Santa Anna had only four options: (1) advance up the Saltillo road, overwhelm the force there, and catch the American forces in the flank; (2) gain the heights of the plateau to attack the American center; (3) advance across the ground between the plateau and the Sierra Madre, which afforded a direct approach to Buena Vista, where the Americans had an advanced supply depot; or (4) attempt a combination of the three, hoping to break the U.S. line at some point. On the afternoon of 21 February, in anticipation of these moves, Wool began deploying his troops in an irregular line. To defend the Saltillo road approach, he positioned Captain Washington's five-gun battery (Company B, 4th Artillery) on a small hill facing south down the narrows and ordered wagons filled

with rocks pushed across the path to preclude any Mexican attempt to charge the battery with cavalry. The 1st Illinois, commanded by Colonel Hardin, supported the guns from hastily constructed positions. One of Hardin's battalions was entrenched on the right at the narrowest point of the roadway and extended to the natural ravine; Hardin's main body, with a single cannon from Washington's battery, occupied breastworks on a high hill a short distance to the left and in front of the battery. Colonel McKee's 2d Kentucky, on the army's far right flank, provided additional security from a large hill west of Washington's position. Wool posted Colonel Bissell's 2d Illinois to guard McKee's left flank. Bissell took up position approximately one-half mile behind the Kentuckians. General Lane's brigade of the 2d and 3d Indiana regiments formed additional lines behind Bissell. Yell's Arkansas cavalry and the 1st Kentucky's mounted companies guarded the path that led up to the plateau farther to the east. Two dragoon squadrons and Texas volunteers made up a mobile reserve force. The remaining American troops remained in Saltillo to protect the trains there and to serve as a reserve force.

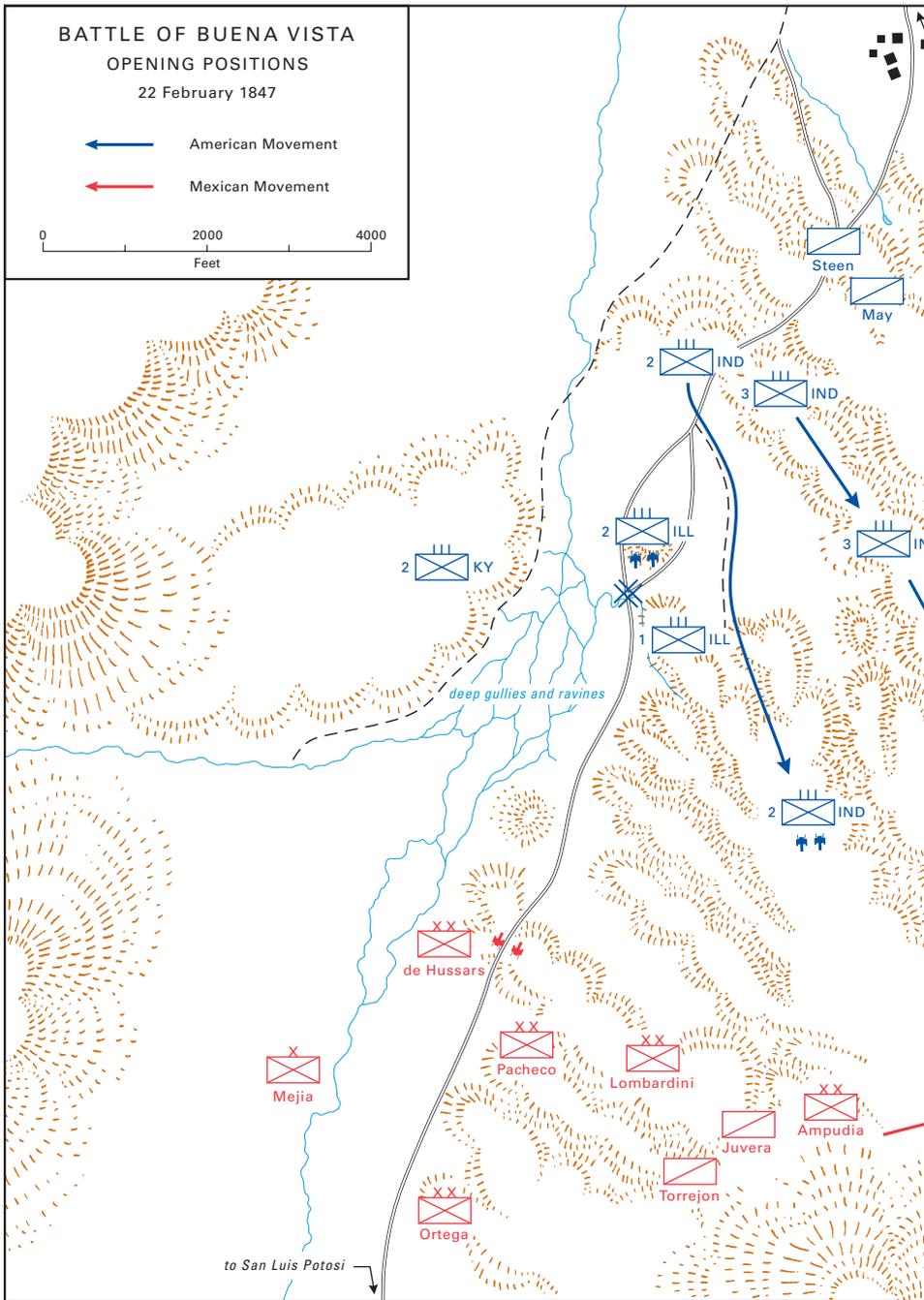
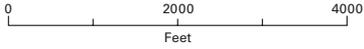
While the Americans moved into position, Santa Anna had a crucial decision to make at Encarnación, nearly thirty miles south of La Angostura. Although he had lost the element of surprise, Santa Anna doubtless felt that his superior numbers would win the day, so he committed his forces to the only offensive he would launch during the entire Mexican War. At 1100 on 21 February, his weary soldiers moved onto the Saltillo road for the march north, each carrying a full canteen and three days' rations. He was determined to make a forced march to Agua Nueva, approximately twenty-three miles north over waterless ground, by nightfall. Pushed to the brink of collapse, the Mexican soldiers dragged themselves into camp at the end of the march. There they spent a bitterly cold night without benefit of fires for fear of detection by American patrols. Before dawn, they began their approach over the final twelve miles that lay between them and the U.S. Army at La Angostura.

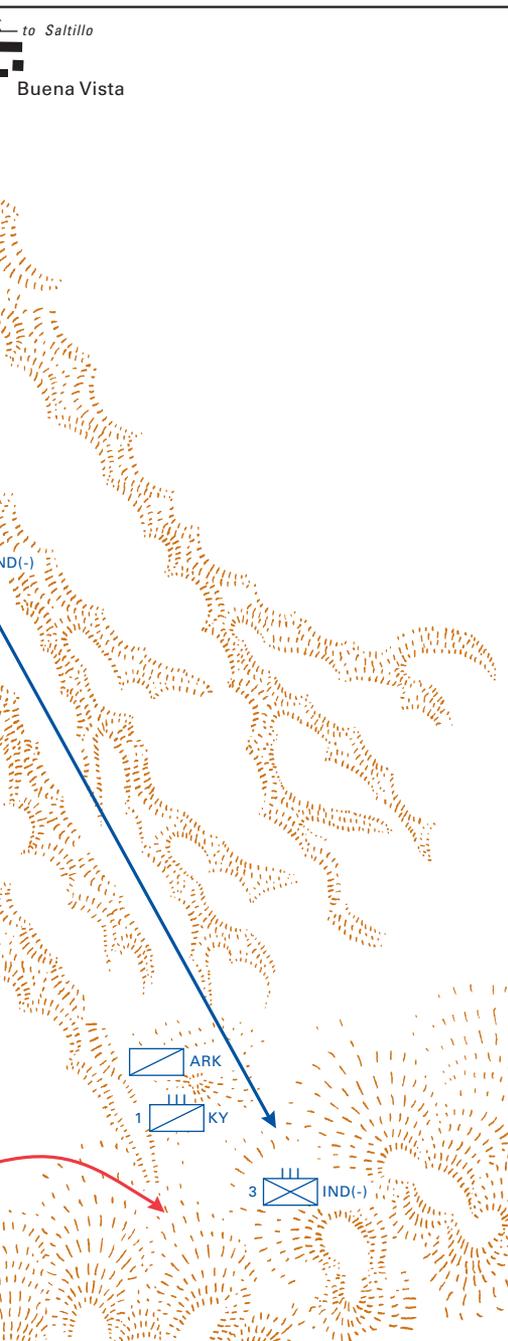
*Buena Vista: The Battle Begins*  
*22 February 1847*

Santa Anna's cavalry screen made contact with the Americans at 0900 on 22 February and began reconnoitering the field. Wool notified Taylor, who rushed to the field with most of the Saltillo garrison. Taylor gave Wool direct tactical command over the American position, as Wool

**BATTLE OF BUENA VISTA**  
**OPENING POSITIONS**  
22 February 1847

-  American Movement
-  Mexican Movement





was much more familiar with the ground. Taylor would serve as a motivator and calming influence on the outnumbered Americans and would retain responsibility for protecting Saltillo. As the tactical commander, Wool decided to keep the newly arrived troops in reserve for the time being.

As the Americans watched the Mexican Army concentrate, Taylor's veterans realized that this fight would be very different from those they had fought earlier in the conflict. During the two previous battles—at Resaca de la Palma and Monterrey—it was the Mexicans who had chosen strong defensive ground that the Americans overran. Here the roles were reversed—it was the Americans who were forced to make a desperate stand against an attacking army.

It took Santa Anna's large force several hours to draw together and move into position. Santa Anna placed three sixteen-pound guns supported by the *Regiment de Hussars* on the Saltillo road and Brig. Gen. Francisco Mejia's infantry brigade father west (across deep gullies) to protect his left. Pacheco's *Vanguard Division*, along with Lombardini's *Center Division* and fourteen pieces of artillery, made up the Mexican center, while Ortega's *Rear Guard Division* was held in reserve just behind the others.



*Carl Nebel's Battle of Buena Vista (Library of Congress)*

Santa Anna positioned Maj. Gen. Pedro de Ampudia's *Light Infantry Brigade*, Brig. Gen. Julian Juvera's *2d Cavalry Brigade*, and two batteries on the right.

The Mexican forces were in position and ready to initiate contact at 1500, but Santa Anna decided it was too late in the day to undertake a concerted action and instead determined to probe the American left. He sent Ampudia's light brigade to the base of the Sierra Madre on the eastern side of the pass, where they began scaling one of the peaks in search of a path onto the plateau.

Wool observed the movement and responded by sending three companies of Kentucky cavalry, Lt. Col. John S. Roane with four companies of dismounted Arkansas riflemen, and Maj. Willis A. Gorman with four companies of infantry from the 3d Indiana, all under the command of Col. Humphrey Marshall. He also sent the 2d Indiana and Capt. John O'Brien's section of guns into the large gap between the main American position centered around Washington's guns on the Saltillo road and Marshall's command a mile to the south.

A deep ravine hampered the Mexicans' forward progress and separated the two sides. They exchanged sporadic fire over this topographic feature for several hours, but neither was able to advance in any numbers. A small Mexican contingent did manage to work its way

across the ravine before nightfall, but the American position remained intact. Fighting quickly tapered off, but both groups remained on the mountainside throughout the night.

The night of 22 February was a miserable one for the soldiers in both armies. A cold drizzle fell for several hours. Neither command allowed campfires, so the troops huddled together for warmth. Many of the Mexican soldiers consumed their final rations. They would have to overwhelm the defenders and capture their supplies if they hoped to eat another meal at Buena Vista.

At 0200 on 23 February, Wool and Santa Anna began to reposition their units for the coming fight. Ampudia received a number of additional troops to make a concerted effort against the American left. Santa Anna's chief of staff, Brig. Gen. Manuel Micheltoarena, took direct control of five eight-pound artillery pieces and posted them onto a knoll overlooking the plateau. Santa Anna augmented his troops on the Saltillo road and placed them under the command of General Santiago Blanco. With these moves, Santa Anna positioned himself to overwhelm the American left, assault its center, and smash through its defenses on the Saltillo road.

Wool anticipated Santa Anna's all-out effort and shuffled his own troops. Washington's battery with the 1st Illinois in support remained in its original location on the Saltillo road. Wool reinforced Marshall's position on the left side of the line with Maj. Xerxes F. Trial's companies of Illinois troops and Captain Conner's Texas Volunteer Company. Wool also strengthened his presence on the plateau by sending Bowles' 2d Indiana, supported by O'Brien's three guns, some three-quarters of a mile south and east of Washington's position on the Saltillo road and just north of Marshall's men on the mountainside. Bowles anchored his left on the edge of a deep ravine. Bissell's 2d Illinois and Capt. Thomas W. Sherman's battery guarded Bowles' right. Colonel McKee's 2d Kentucky moved to Bissell's right, but McKee's own right flank simply ended in the middle of the plateau without any protection. Wool held Captain Steen's troops of the 1st Dragoons, McCulloch's Texas Rangers, and the 3d Indiana in reserve to the rear of the main line. After the troops moved into their new positions, the American line stretched roughly a mile from north to south.

Shortly before dawn, Santa Anna ordered each of his regiments to play reveille at a different time to emphasize the size of his force and intimidate the Americans. His men quickly moved into their predetermined jump-off points and prepared to strike across the entire American front.

*Buena Vista: Second Day, Early Morning*  
*23 February 1847*

Fighting began just after dawn when Ampudia's reinforced troops hit the American left. Marshall's troops blunted the initial advance, but the superior Mexican manpower slowly overpowered them. The Americans reluctantly retreated but maintained their cohesion and delayed Ampudia for several hours.

Santa Anna waited until all eyes were watching the action on the American left before he opened the next phase of the battle. At approximately 0800, Mexican troops assaulted the American right and, an hour later, the center.

On the Saltillo road, units under Generals Blanco and Mora advanced toward the narrows in column formation. Gullies to their left and steep slopes to the right prevented the Mexicans from maneuvering off the road or into linear battle formation. Throughout the battle, the Mexican generals knew they would be able to better command and control their poorly trained troops in column formation, but they must have realized it would be very difficult to shift them into battle lines under fire without losing unit cohesion. Captain Washington's guns took a frightful toll on the massed Mexican troops, but they continued to advance despite the battery's rapid and accurate fire. Once the Mexicans came within range of musket fire, the 1st Illinois delivered several deadly volleys into their ranks. Under this severe pressure, the Mexican infantrymen broke and quickly retreated south down the Saltillo road out of the defenders' line of fire.

As the sound of Washington's battery fire echoed through the pass, the divisions of Generals Lombardini and Pacheco started through a broad ravine hidden from American eyes by its high banks to the east. Close on their heels marched General Ortega's division and then Juvera's cavalry brigade, some 7,000 men in all. Santa Anna had made an excellent choice in selecting this approach for his assault force. The head of the ravine had a relatively shallow slope onto the plateau, unlike the others in the area. This allowed the Mexicans to move large formations and ascend onto the plateau without much difficulty. Wool realized this weakness when he posted the 2d Indiana and three attached guns to guard this strategically important point.

Because of the broken terrain, Bowles did not see the Mexican columns until they exploded out onto the plateau. The attacking infantrymen quickly formed into brigades and advanced against the 2d Indiana. Wool sent a messenger to General Lane, the brigade commander of both Indiana regiments, that the 2d must hold its



*The Battle of Buena Vista* (Library of Congress)

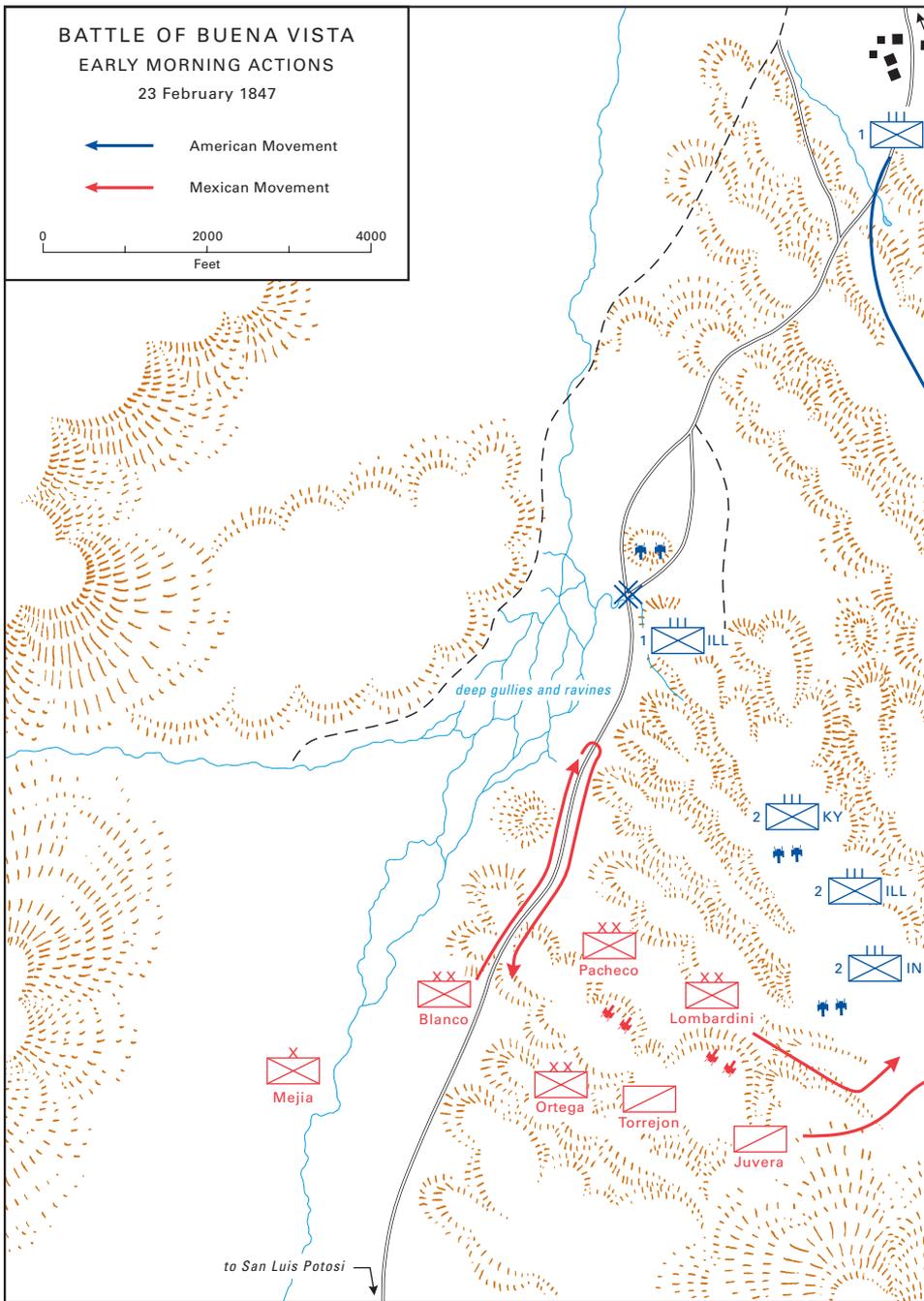
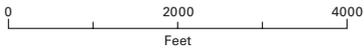
position at all costs. In response, Lane ordered O'Brien's three guns forward with the 2d Indiana to stem the Mexican assault. When the 2d Indiana advanced, it received heavy fire from both Micheltorena's newly positioned battery and the front ranks of Pacheco's division. O'Brien's artillerymen fired desperately into the massed infantry and tore gaping holes in its lines. Sherman's guns and the 2d Illinois also joined in the firing from their positions with similar effect, but the sheer size of the Mexican force more than offset its losses.

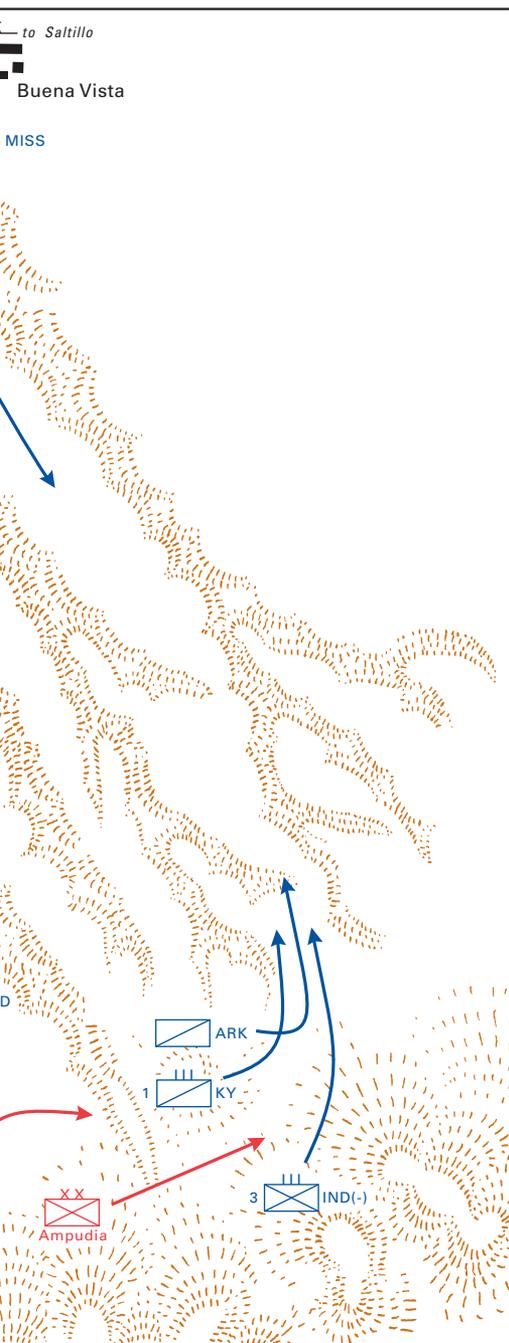
Lane ordered O'Brien and the 2d Indiana forward a second time to secure a better firing position. The move proved costly. O'Brien limbered his guns and started to advance, but Bowles misunderstood the directive and ordered a retreat. After suffering some ninety casualties in a few minutes, the 2d Indiana panicked and broke for the rear. O'Brien reached his new position and began firing, only to realize that he did not have infantry support. He maintained this position until forced to retreat by the Mexican advance; he had to leave one four-pound gun behind.

After the 2d Indiana and O'Brien's battery gave way, the full force of Lombardini's division bore down on the 2d Illinois and Sherman's guns. Wool hurried Bragg's battery to aid the 2d Illinois, but Bragg was slow to arrive. Confronted with overwhelming force, Colonel Bissell executed an orderly fighting withdrawal, which prevented

**BATTLE OF BUENA VISTA**  
**EARLY MORNING ACTIONS**  
23 February 1847

-  American Movement
-  Mexican Movement





the Mexicans from immediately outflanking the entire American position. Sherman's and Bragg's guns ripped into the attacking Mexican infantry, inflicting heavy casualties on the massed ranks and temporarily halting the advance. Meanwhile, the Americans managed to retain some of the plateau's critical high ground.

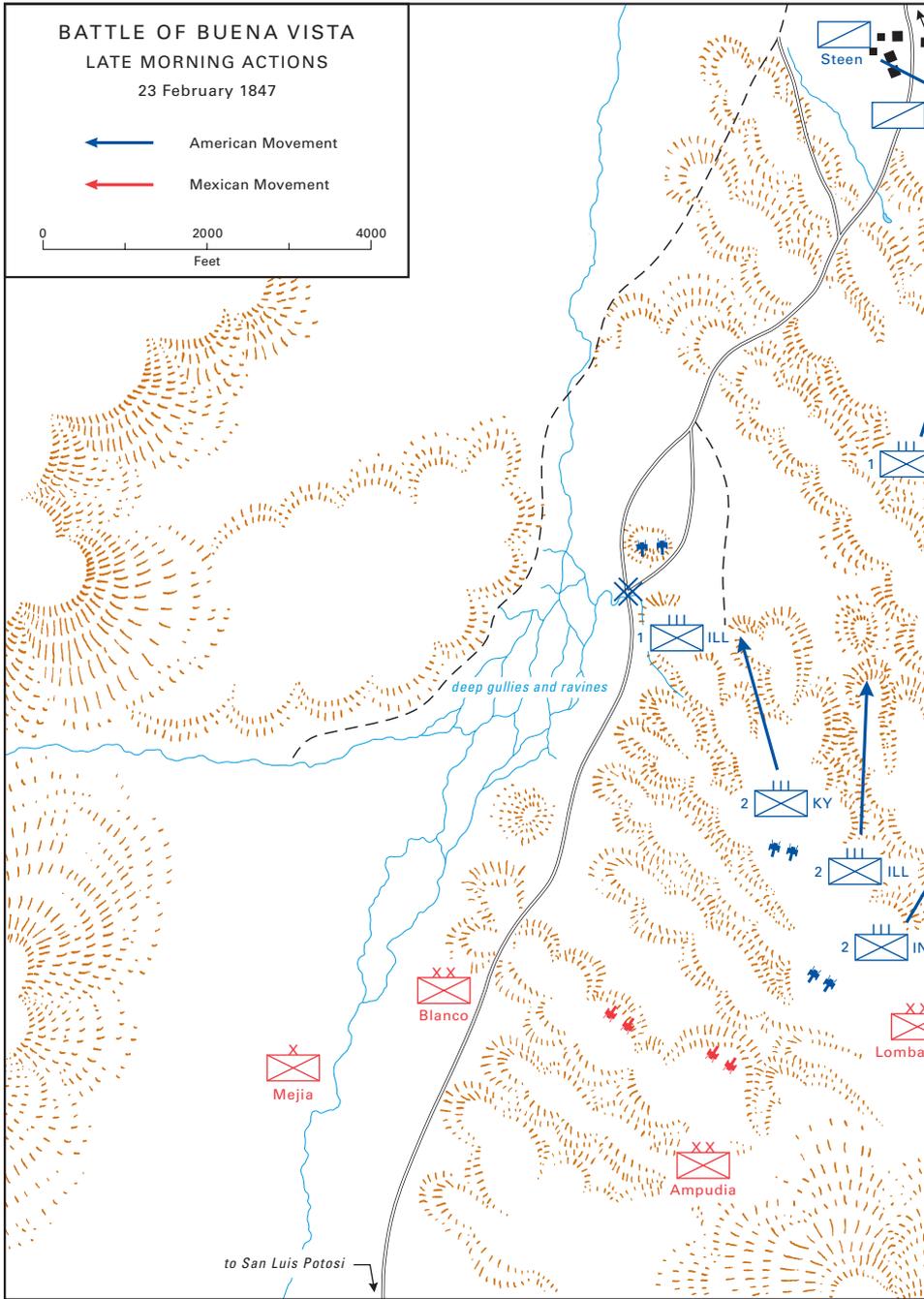
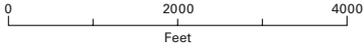
With the American left collapsing, Marshall's men on the mountain faced encirclement. He quickly ordered them onto the plateau, but a large number of his cavalry remounted their horses and rode north toward the hacienda de Buena Vista, opening an unopposed avenue of attack directly to the supply depot at the hacienda. Fortunately for the Americans, a brief lull in the fighting gave each side an opportunity to regroup. But the situation did not look promising for Wool: In less than forty-five minutes of fighting, his entire left had collapsed.

*Buena Vista: Second Day, Late Morning  
23 February 1847*

Taylor reached the field with the 1st Mississippi shortly before 1000 As soon as he arrived, Wool went to the threatened sector and began collecting as many troops as he could find to establish another line. While Washington's

**BATTLE OF BUENA VISTA**  
**LATE MORNING ACTIONS**  
23 February 1847

-  American Movement
-  Mexican Movement





The few remaining soldiers fended off the initial assault, but Colonel Yell died fighting the Mexican lancers. As the Mexicans reformed for a second attempt, Steen's dragoons successfully charged their left flank and broke Juvera's column in two. One part continued toward the hacienda, where the Americans beat back two separate assaults, thanks in large part to the protection of the hacienda's thick stone walls. Juvera's second column continued past the hacienda into a small valley, where it immediately came under fire from 1st Lt. John F. Reynolds' section of Sherman's battery, which had raced across the plateau to help check the Mexican attack.

Juvera's columns attempted to reorganize south of Buena Vista, but Reynolds continued to shell the massing cavalry. Colonel May soon arrived with his squadron of dragoons and forced the Mexicans to flee in confusion. Davis, from his position on the plateau to the south, observed the fleeing Mexicans and moved to block their line of retreat. Juvera's survivors fought their way through the Mississippians; Davis was wounded but remained on the field during the fighting.

Another threat emerged on the plateau as the 1st Mississippi moved back into its previous position. Shortly after noon, Ortega's *Rear Guard Division*, with General Torrejon's *3d Cavalry Brigade* screening it, attempted to flank Davis and Bissell to the east. The American regiments formed an inverted "V," with the open end pointing toward the Mexicans. Tactical doctrine at the time called for an infantry regiment to form a square against a cavalry threat, as several American units did at Palo Alto. Instead, Davis and Bissell took full advantage of the ground they defended. Sherman sent one of his guns to aid Davis, who posted it on the 3d Indiana's extreme right.

Torrejon moved against the unusual arrangement and closed within 100 yards of the American position under artillery fire. At eighty yards, he ordered an all-out charge. Davis gave the order to



*Wool at Buena Vista*  
(Library of Congress)

fire only when Torrejon's force came within seventy yards of his own men. The deadly effectiveness of the close-range volley brought the Mexicans to a standstill. Additional musket volleys and canister from Sherman's gun discomfited the surviving lancers still further. Seeing that the advance had stalled completely, the Mississippians charged forward and drove the lancers away.

Torrejon's force, along with some of the infantry swept up in his lancers' retreat, took shelter in a nearby ravine. Once there, however, they became trapped and were unable to return to the main Mexican line. At approximately 1300, as the Americans prepared to attack the isolated force of some 2,000 men, Mexican officers approached with a white flag. Taylor ordered all firing stopped and Wool met with the officers. They asked what General Taylor "wanted." Wool took the flag and tried to meet with Santa Anna but was greeted by artillery fire. The flag of truce had been a ruse that allowed the bulk of Torrejon's and Ortega's men to slip past the Americans and regain their own line.

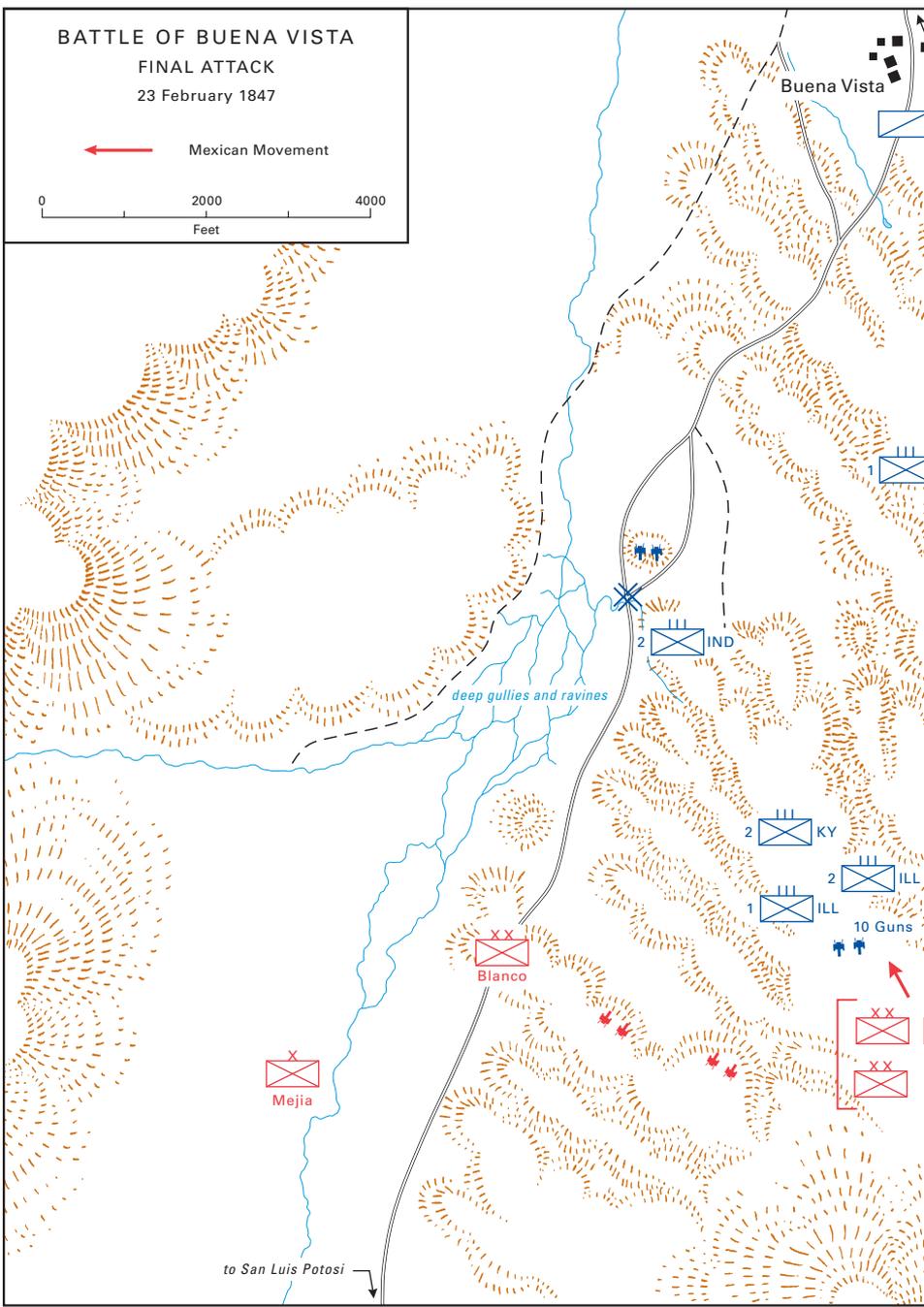
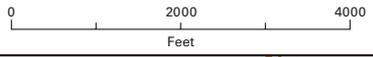
After nearly seven hours of desperate fighting, another lull fell over the battlefield. Both sides recovered as many of their wounded as possible and rested their tired men and horses. While the Mexican attacks had turned the American left, threatened the American forward supply depot at the hacienda de Buena Vista, and cost Taylor a number of casualties, Santa Anna had failed to drive the U.S. Army out of La Angostura. The Mexican general decided to take a final gamble with his superior manpower. He sent General Minon's cavalry brigade on a wide sweep eastward around the American position to capture Taylor's primary supply center at Saltillo. Minon never attacked, however, because he found the depot too well guarded. Meanwhile, Santa Anna massed as many men as possible to drive through the center of the American line. He moved his artillery forward, called up all his reserves, and created a new unit out of the wreckage of Ampudia's, Lombardini's, Pacheco's, and Ortega's divisions. He placed this unit under the control of Brig. Gen. Francisco Perez, the only Mexican leader not yet engaged. The newly formed command began moving toward the plateau at approximately 1500.

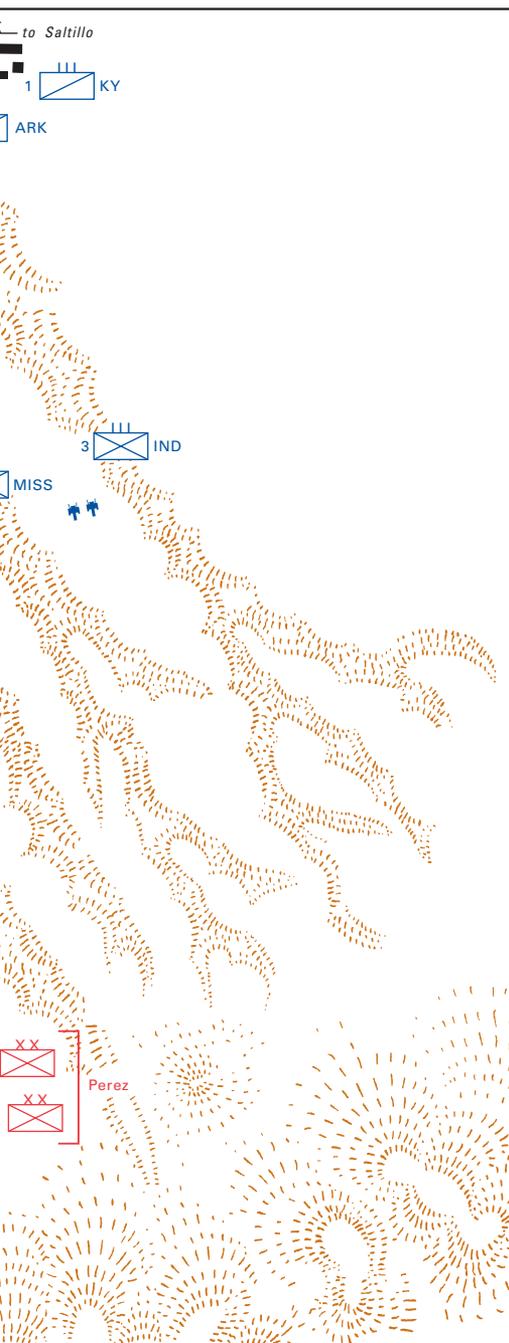
*Buena Vista: Second Day, The Final Attack*  
*23 February 1847*

The assault force's vanguard reached its objective at 1700. The Mexicans emerged from one of the ravines and immediately ran

**BATTLE OF BUENA VISTA**  
**FINAL ATTACK**  
23 February 1847

← Mexican Movement





into fire from several sections of O'Brien's and Thomas' guns, which were guarding the center of the plateau. The Mexicans quickly backtracked into the ravine to escape the artillery's concentrated fire and await reinforcements.

The Americans viewed this as a general retreat. Colonel Hardin, apparently without receiving directions from Taylor or Wool, ordered the 1st and 2d Illinois and 2d Kentucky regiments forward in pursuit. But instead of finding the Mexicans falling back, they stumbled directly into the main body of Perez's force. Shocked and too close to use their muskets, the American volunteers were drawn into a bloody hand-to-hand melee. Hardin and Lt. Col. Henry Clay Jr., son of the famous Senator and outspoken critic of the war against Mexico, were both mortally wounded while fighting a holding action to allow their men to fall back to the plateau. The American artillerymen fired round after round of canister into the Mexican lines at point-blank range but were overwhelmed by the seemingly inexhaustible manpower. Two of O'Brien's guns were overrun when the majority of their crews were wounded and the horses necessary to pull them to safety were shot. The situation was critical—it appeared that Santa Anna would break through and win the day.

Bragg's battery and the remainder of Sherman's, some ten additional guns, raced forward toward the breach on the plateau with orders from Taylor to "maintain the position at every hazard." Lacking infantry support, the two audaciously unlimbered their guns a mere fifty yards from the Mexican line. Desperate to wreak as much havoc as possible on the approaching Mexican formation, they loaded the cannon with double canister and fired. The American guns cut down scores of Perez's men. Each discharge from the massed artillery blew gaping holes in the tightly packed columns, and the attack stalled in the face of the murderous cannon fire. The severe undulations of the terrain prevented the numerically superior Mexican force from shifting from column to line formation, which kept all but the most forward troops from firing while maximizing the destructive effects of the American artillery. When the lead units recoiled from the point-blank fire, the soldiers behind them were unable to deploy.

One of the most famous quotes from the Mexican War was uttered at this time. As Bragg began firing, he sent an aide to Taylor for additional instructions. Taylor responded with "Tell him to give 'em hell!" This exchange has been romanticized and altered by many writers. The most common altered version has Taylor calmly informing his subordinate to add, "A little more grape, Captain Bragg." This version almost certainly is inaccurate, as the American guns were firing canister rounds, not grapeshot. Another version has Taylor saying, "Well, double-shot your guns and give 'em hell, Bragg."

Seeing his attack wavering, Santa Anna committed Torrejon's and Andrade's cavalry to try to break the American line. As the lancers charged, Captain Washington's battery began lobbing spherical shell (exploding shells) into their formations. The accurate firing forced the cavalry to break off and try to reform out of range of the artillery.

An unexpected rain squall in the valley stopped all hostilities at approximately 1800. By that time, both sides were exhausted. The Mexican assault had spent itself. While they had managed to gain a foothold on the plateau, the Mexican infantry had suffered significant losses at the hands of the U.S. artillery. American artillerymen had also checked the cavalry advance.

Taylor's force had fared little better. Many of his infantry regiments suffered significant losses. His artillerymen were fatigued after nearly twelve hours of constant maneuvering over broken ground. They had lost a number of guns, horses, and other equipment during the close-quarters combat on the plateau.

During the lull, the Mexican forces slowly withdrew toward their original line. Taylor and Wool collected what men they could and began piecing together another defensive line. The American troops spent another sleepless night on the plateau and braced themselves for an assault in the morning. Most realized that in their current state they could not repulse another Mexican advance. When dawn broke on the morning of 24 February, they were stunned to find that Santa Anna had withdrawn his army toward Agua Nueva during the night. The soldiers cheered as word spread, while Taylor and Wool embraced each other. The U.S. Army had withstood Santa Anna's onslaught.

Santa Anna's decision to retreat was a major tactical blunder. He still had a huge numerical advantage over Taylor, and he had pushed the Americans to the brink of collapse. Taylor and Wool could not have withstood another assault on the plateau. On the other hand, Santa Anna's force, although numerous, was tired and hungry after its long forced march and had sustained heavy casualties, primarily at the hand of the U.S. artillery. Santa Anna apparently decided that the risks of another attack at Buena Vista were too great. Instead, he decided to escape and prepare to meet Winfield Scott in Vera Cruz.

The costs to both sides were great, especially compared with the opening battles of the war. Taylor lost 272 men killed, 387 wounded, and 6 missing in action. This represented some 14 percent of his total force engaged. Santa Anna's men fared even worse: Mexican losses amounted to 591 killed, 1,048 wounded, and some 1,894 missing or deserted—nearly 18 percent of his army.

Shortly after the battle, Taylor felt it necessary to defend his decision to engage Santa Anna's force south of Saltillo against charges of poor military judgment leveled by members of Polk's administration. Many also questioned Taylor's failure to follow Scott's directive to remain in Monterrey. Taylor argued that whatever his losses at Buena Vista, the consequences would have been far more severe had Santa Anna caught the American force in Monterrey. It became clear, however, that administration officials no longer supported Taylor and that he would not play a significant role in the remainder of the war.

### *War Ends in the North*

Santa Anna stopped to rest for a short time at Agua Nueva before beginning the long trek back to San Luis Potosi. Taylor's men briefly advanced as far south as Encarnación to monitor the Mexican retreat and make sure they did not turn back toward the American camp.

By March, however, Taylor abandoned his advanced positions and consolidated all his forces at Monterrey.

While the fighting raged at Buena Vista, General Urrea had led his cavalry brigade around the American position into its line of communications and united with irregulars under General Canales, who had been conducting guerrilla operations. Together, on 22 February they severed the strategically important Monterrey-Camargo road, which carried supplies to Taylor's force from the Rio Grande. For the next two weeks, they terrorized the local population and ambushed several supply trains, killing all the teamsters and drivers. Urrea also launched raids against many of the isolated American garrisons along the route, especially Marin, the main link between Camargo and Monterrey. American forces were able to defend themselves, but the flow of supplies ceased. On 2 March, Taylor sent a large relief force north. They caught up with Urrea's forces outside Marin on 16 March, but the Mexican general slipped away before he became fully engaged. Taylor reopened the Monterrey-Camargo road but did not completely eliminate the threat to his line of communications.

Taylor's forces spent the remainder of the war in various garrisons around Monterrey. They fought no other major engagements and instead focused on counterinsurgency operations. Taylor himself stayed in Monterrey through 6 November 1847, when he transferred command of the Army of Occupation to Wool. Granted leave by the War Department, Taylor returned to his plantation in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in time to mount his successful bid for the presidency in 1848.

Wool maintained command over the Army of Occupation for the remainder of the conflict and ultimately succeeded in limiting guerrilla attacks against his forces. He also worked to normalize everyday life for Mexican citizens by reopening schools and other public places.

### *Analysis*

The Buena Vista campaign offered the U.S. Army a variety of lessons, none of which was formalized into doctrine until William Hardee, a captain in the Mexican War, wrote a new tactics manual in 1855. The practical experience of the junior officers, most West Point trained, influenced their thinking up to and in many cases throughout the American Civil War. The battle of Buena Vista illustrated the importance of being able to concentrate forces quickly when conducting operations deep in enemy territory, especially when you

are outnumbered. The battle further reinforced the informal doctrine of deploying artillery in advanced positions without infantry support, which many officers who fought in the Mexican War attempted to use in the Civil War fifteen years later. The Army learned that divisions and their subordinate brigades, under experienced commanders, were necessary to control the actions of multiple regiments.

In terms of operational movement, General Wool's 800-mile march from San Antonio, Texas, to Buena Vista was one of the best-conceived and best-executed maneuvers of the war. Wool's strict disciplinary measures kept his three thousand soldiers well in hand during the march, and he continually planned for future operations throughout his expedition. For example, Wool reconnoitered the route from Monclova to Saltillo long before he received General Worth's message to hurry south in December 1846. Wool put his entire force on the road toward Saltillo within hours of receiving Worth's call for aid and marched his men 120 miles in less than four days to reach the threatened American position. Wool's action, which forced Santa Anna to abandon his first planned attack against Taylor's army, was a textbook example of rapidly concentrating divided forces. Wool also chose and defended La Angostura pass. He deserves great credit for being the architect of the American victory.

Artillery was a key factor in Taylor's victory at Buena Vista. The artillerymen used their access to the plateau and the Saltillo road to move rapidly across the battlefield and reach critical points where their firepower was needed. Furthermore, they audaciously unlimbered their guns close to advancing Mexican forces, often without infantry support. They used this aggressive tactic to stem several attacks that could have easily enveloped and decimated the small American force. Without the artillery, Taylor's inexperienced and outnumbered infantrymen would probably not have withstood Santa Anna's offensive. However, while the use of unsupported artillery proved very successful against Mexican flintlock muskets, Civil War artillerymen who faced rifled musket fire found deploying forward without infantry to be deadly.

The circumstances leading up to the battle at Buena Vista also led to internal divisions within the American officer corps. During the initial phase of the war, the U.S. Army's small group of professional officers fought well, bonded, and helped vindicate the importance of the Regular Army. A rift developed, however, between Generals Taylor and Scott that many of their subordinates perpetuated in the following months. Taylor never forgave Scott for

requisitioning the bulk of his troops without formally requesting the transfer. Officers under both commanders took sides and helped sow the seeds of discontent. Throughout the remainder of the war, relationships remained politically charged, and officers often leveled public and unsubstantiated attacks against their fellow officers from the other camp.

Buena Vista had several implications for the United States. First, the battle was politically important for Zachary Taylor. He survived President Polk's plan to discredit him and limit his public appeal. Instead, Polk unknowingly set the stage for Taylor's greatest victory and helped him easily secure the Whig nomination and ultimately win the 1848 presidential contest.

The victory also had a powerful effect on the American view of volunteer soldiers. Although some units had broken and run, others stood and fought well. For some, the Army's success at Buena Vista confirmed the widely held belief that an army of citizen-soldiers could triumph in the face of any enemy force, no matter its size. This popular belief ignored the fact that it was American artillery, commanded by trained professionals, that had ultimately won the day. Without the constant movement of well-served American guns to each crisis point, Santa Anna and the Mexican Army could well have won their victory.

While the artillery deserves much of the credit for the U.S. victory, Santa Anna's failure to carry the field at Buena Vista was principally due to the eminently defensible terrain held by U.S. units, which forced the Mexican Army to fight in column rather than line and greatly hindered Mexican efforts to quickly reinforce the success their units had on the battlefield. Because of the terrain, Santa Anna's attacks occurred at isolated points and irregular intervals along the American front, which gave the U.S. artillery time to race to trouble spots and repulse the Mexican advances. Santa Anna also suffered a failure of will on the night of 23 February, when he decided not to risk another attack and the possible disintegration of his army because of lack of food and water.

Santa Anna remained undeterred in his fight against the invading Yanqui, even as he and his force limped back to San Luis Potosi. When he learned of the coming American offensive at Vera Cruz, he shifted his attention from the defeat by Taylor's small Army of Occupation and began preparations to meet General Scott's army. He focused all of his considerable energy on stopping the new American assault aimed at the heart of Mexico.

After the battle of Buena Vista, Santa Anna's supporters managed to convince the Mexican public that the battle and subsequent withdrawal from Buena Vista constituted a victory. In so doing, they were able to rally public support for both Santa Anna and the conflict against the American invaders. Indeed, the reported "success" at Buena Vista ensured Santa Anna of a strong military reputation among his compatriots throughout the war. As for his soldiers, they had done everything asked of them. They had marched nearly five hundred miles in forty days over grueling terrain; fought a dispiriting battle that they had nearly won; and suffered 10,500 casualties from battlefield losses, hunger, disease, and desertion. The men had been let down by their commander, not the other way around.

Santa Anna took several of the elite units that had been part of his *Army of the North*—including the *Regiment de Hussars*, the *Legion de Extranjeros*, and General Ampudia's *Light Infantry Brigade*—south to Mexico City. These units formed the core of his newly created *Army of the East* to meet Scott's invasion. Later, the remaining organizations from the Buena Vista campaign marched eastward to Mexico City's defense, but the Mexican Army never again came as close to success as it had at Buena Vista. For the Mexican Army, the campaign and battle at Buena Vista was one of the great "might-have-beens" of the Mexican War. With great effort and self-sacrifice, Santa Anna's *Army of the North* came close to making the cost of the war perhaps more than the United States was willing to pay. However, with the Mexican defeat, the United States was poised to strike deep into Mexico in a bold attempt to win the war in a single stroke.

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COVER

*The Battle of Buena Vista* (Library of Congress);  
below, *A Little More Grape Capt Bragg* (Library of Congress)

A horizontal green banner with a white central stripe. The text "BUENA VISTA 1847" is written in yellow, bold, uppercase letters across the white stripe.

**BUENA VISTA 1847**

*CMH PUB 73-4*

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